

**Ann Ang, *Burning Walls for Paper Spirits*. Singapore: Pagesetters Services, 2021. 68 pp. ISBN: 9789811823121.**

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Ann Ang's first full-length collection is a delicate series of vignette-like poems which move dreamily through a world that seems to possess an innate sense of rhythm, swaying through descriptions of trees, light, and touch. A quick summary of the collection reveals that it claims to describe how "everyday objects become invested with soul, and how we have in turn become thing-like amidst the mechanics of everyday living". These poems do indeed convey a sense of alienation, of being unable to completely understand the objects their speakers interact with. They also open us up to forms of understanding that return us to the physical, focused on sensations and the material.

Composed of 30 poems, the sequence first locates us in the abstract, moving through tiny, vignette-like descriptions to explore the concrete and natural landscapes of Singapore – perhaps not showing us anything that we haven't already seen before, but nevertheless providing us with familiar surroundings with which to experience the disconnect between the natural and the concrete.

In an attempt to root us in the concrete despite some of the more abstract concepts the poems invoke, Ang's descriptions are satisfyingly tactile, focusing on the sensation of touch or the absence of it. In "Claws", we feel the "pinched extraction of flesh", the "slow opera of smudged fingers" (11), while in "Jurong West 505", an unnamed woman tenderly "takes / the old man's hands in her rubber gloves / beside the ixora bushes, / and clips his nails" (15). What appears to be a romantic gesture in "Wet Hands" is described in a rather unsettling way: "Your hand on my face unlimbs me – / a thawing chicken wing" (17).

Tension in romance is further explored in some of Ang's poems through the motif of hands: lovers reach across spaces, dance delicately around each other, and only occasionally – like in a chaste Chinese or Korean drama – do they collide. "Hands Drawing Hands" most accurately describes this form of love as a "map of untoothed desire" (7), while the narrator in "Lifeboat" even expresses a slight frustration at the abstract concept of Love: "Oh do up these falling days, love, plot our leaving / Just fix your damn hair, play this old game: you" (9). The most overt mention is in a plaintive ode to love, the aptly titled "Love, How You Wear Me", which continues the highly tactile motif that borders on the sensual: "Belt me to your navel, Love. / My life is sleeved

to your arm, / sheer as the blouse you wear” and again in the final line “I am the sea. Only you / can wear me naked” (13).

Within these poems we see the disconnect between object and person, or situation and person further amplified, as Ang’s disembodied “you” strikes up a relationship between both people and things, dividing both “I” and “you” into diametrically opposed forces reaching across, trying to understand each other. In cases where the “you” is a more all-seeing, all-encompassing “You”, this inscrutability is perhaps unsurprising. An excellent example of this exchange can be found in “Becoming an HDB Flat”, where the speaker metamorphoses into a structure that is an iconic fixture of the Singapore skyline. In this instance, the slow transformation from person to building both emphasises the building’s personhood and introduces a “they”, highlighting how looking/not looking in can be powerful, or that perhaps the *attention* paid to something is what gives it importance: “Peering through [a window], I find you / curled up, a thumbprint / in my bed”, and “Outside the curtains, the workers / raise their gondola, to paint / us a new face. / They never look in” (44).

One of the most powerful poems in the collection is “Singapore Weather”, where Ang directly critiques the capitalist nature of the Singaporean market. She cleverly knots together the water cycle with the ceaseless hunger and greed for “durians and houses” (47), the weather a quite literally cold comparison (“negative ions”, “stamp duties strike”) against “This fiery tribe, polyglots of this entrepôt, / have listed the sun itself on the stock exchange” (47). Meanwhile, Ang’s final metaphor fuses both unstoppable forces into a single, inescapable reality: “Rain / in Singapore always falls, / lavish as hailstones, / loud as coins, / hard as smiling teeth” (47).

But among the serious, the tender, and the plaintive, there are several dryly humorous, tongue-in-cheek moments that make the reader pause to laugh — a welcome distraction from the sights and sounds that some of the other poems have to offer. Take, for example, “S.A.M.”, where in what is presumably a museum, “the most useful room / is the toilet” (41), or the farcical take on durian prices in different countries as explored in “Singapore Weather”, where: “The king of fruits falls with a thunderclap / The stormfront over China remains / unbroken, placing Peninsular Malaysia / in a low pressure basin. All Raja Kunyit / wash down to the southernmost tip / of the Asian continent” (47).

In terms of form, Ang tentatively experiments with scattered stanzas and fill-in-the-blanks poetry. In the case of the cryptic “\_\_\_ all night by You” and “Monday in the Jungle”, the spaces on the page allow the reader to meander languidly from thought to thought, meditating on each stanza or line before moving on to the next. The tension between free form and traditionally structured poetry works very much in the collection’s favour, allowing us to focus on the details and on how the gap between speaker and object is bridged.

A final, but certainly no less important, observation is that the collection is accompanied by beautiful illustrations by Chelsea Sia (the book was chosen for the Official Selection at the London International Creative Competition), which feature delicately textured pieces that are a delight to examine alongside the text. The subjects of these illustrations mostly take the form of lush vegetation and leafy trees, with the occasional structure or landscape, often juxtaposing both man-made and natural “objects”. Of particular note are the illustrations accompanying “Tidal Train”, and “Leaving Druk Yul”, both of which depict enigmatic hints of the world rooted in reality that exists outside these poems.